

More teens enter the workforce

Higher wages, labor shortages bring in more aged 14-17

By ROB KREIGER

Teenagers from 14 to 17 were a steady share of Alaska's resident workforce — around 4 percent — until 2008, when their representation began to decline. The percentage dropped again at the start of the pandemic.

Since 2021, however, workers aged 14 to 17 have been on the rise. The number surged by 23 percent in 2021, to nearly 10,400. Their workforce representation jumped to 3.3 percent that year, the highest since 2008, and has continued to rise.

We don't often talk about workers this young because they make up such a small percentage of the workforce and their time and energy go mostly to school and growing up. But at 14, they can work a variety of jobs, and most 17-year-olds are still in high school, so their experience with work during these years tells us something about changing attitudes and opportunities for a group that will soon enter the adult workforce.

A decline began around 2008

The Great Recession of the late 2000s may have

played a role in the downward trend. While Alaska wasn't hit as hard by the housing crash as the Lower 48, the state lost some workers in 2009, many in the service industries that employ teenagers — accommodations, food service, and retail.

While these industries recovered in the subsequent years, the number of working teens did not. Instead, their share of the resident workforce stayed between 2.7 and 2.9 percent for the next decade.

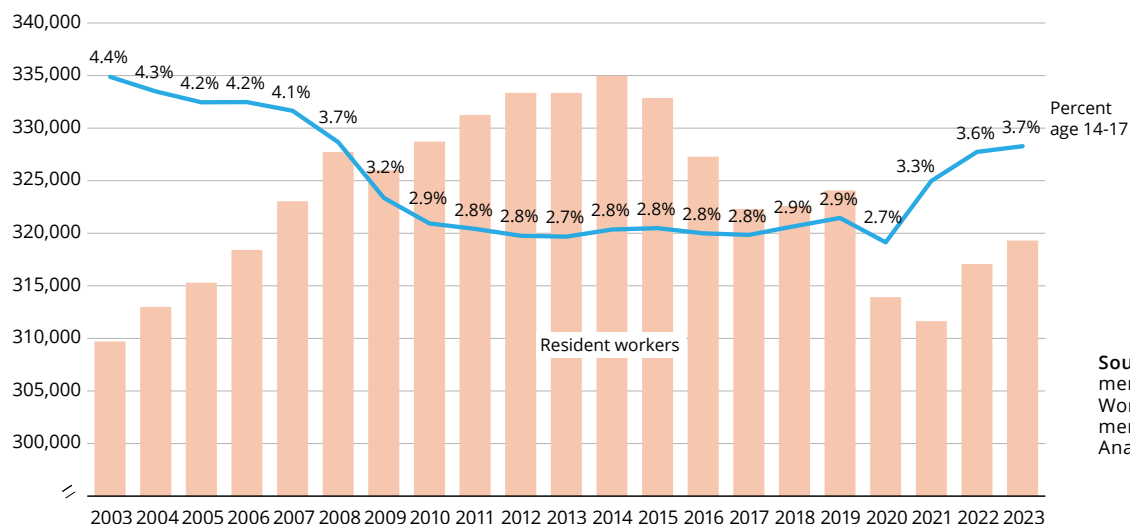
The downward trend was national

The teen workforce shrinking in 2008 and 2009 and then stabilizing at lower levels didn't just happen in Alaska. The same thing occurred nationwide.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics published a study on teen labor force participation before and after the Great Recession that linked the decline to prioritizing school, including summer classes and heavier class loads. It also cited rising college enrollment — the BLS study covered ages 16 to 19, so it captured some college entrants.

This age group can act as an as-needed workforce, and during and after the steep national recession,

Teen share of Alaska resident workers dipped at COVID onset, then surged



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

they may have simply been less needed in a relatively tepid labor market that was slow to recover.

Alaska numbers rose after 2020

The downward trend intensified when the pandemic hit, but in Alaska, it also did a quick U-turn.

In 2020, the number and percentage of working minors dropped to the lowest levels in at least 18 years. At the same time, Alaska's total resident worker count fell to its lowest level since 2004.

While the total resident worker count kept falling in 2021, the number of working teenagers jumped by over 23 percent, pushing their share of Alaska's resident workforce back up. (See the exhibit on the previous page.)

The pandemic-spurred labor shortage, particularly in entry-level jobs, created multiple new opportunities for young workers. That combined with a significant jump in wages may have enticed many to enter the workforce.

Teens started earning a lot more

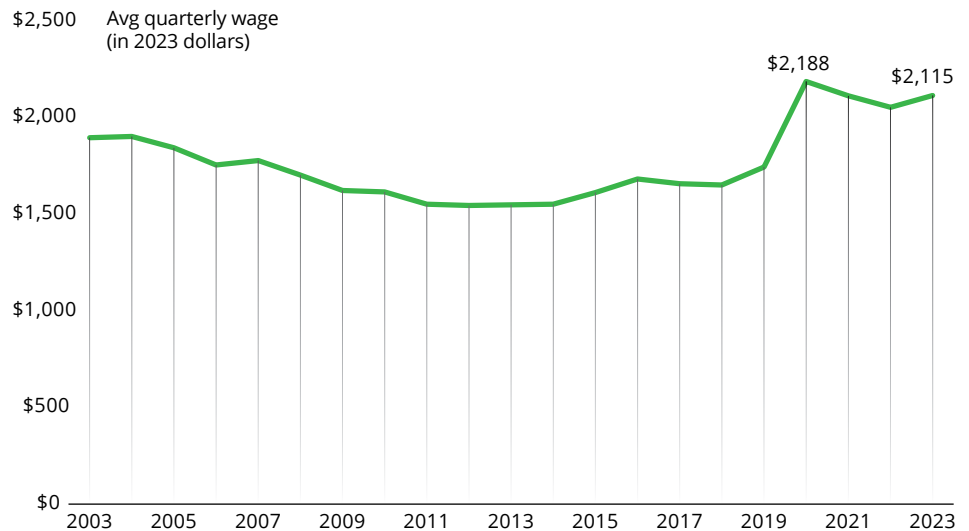
Wages for workers under 18 soared in the post-COVID years, although they remain low relative to other workers.

Child labor laws restrict hours and the types of work teenagers can do. (See the sidebar on the right.) Many work only in the summer, and hours are limited for those who work during the school year. As a result, over the last 20 years, inflation-adjusted wages for the 14-17 category have averaged \$1,770 per quarter compared to \$14,560 for all working residents.

Still, teens' pay has increased considerably over the last few years. Real wages went up about 4 percent for all Alaskans from 2019 to 2023 and 21 percent for ages 14 to 17.

Most of the five-year increase for teens came in

Wages for Alaska teens jump at start of pandemic



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

About Alaska child labor law

Minors from 14 to 16 must have a work permit on file with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, and 17-year-olds must have a permit if the employer is a restaurant licensed to serve alcohol.

No one under 18 is allowed to work more than six days a week.

When school is in session, 14-to-15-year-olds may work only between 5 a.m. and 9 p.m., and the hours spent in school plus work cannot exceed nine. Total hours worked in a week are limited to 23. During school vacations, work hours are limited to 5 a.m. to 9 p.m., and no more than 40 a week.

Teens younger than 14 can *only* work in newspaper sales and delivery, babysitting, handiwork or domestic jobs in homes, and in the entertainment industry, with a special permit. Workers under 14 are not included in this article.

The list of prohibited work, which is long and available at the link below, is almost all high-risk physical jobs. Minors also may not work in the cannabis industry or sell tobacco products.

Visit [Summary of Alaska Child Labor Law](#) for the prohibited jobs list and more detail on the law.

2020, when their wages jumped by over 25 percent. That same year, the number of teens working fell by 12 percent.

The wage spike shows that the types of jobs high-schoolers take were in huge demand as the pandemic shuttered many businesses, especially those with face-to-face services. Employers had to pay much more to attract workers, especially during the worst of COVID.

The types of jobs haven't changed

While the number of working teens and their wages have risen in recent years, other characteristics have held steady over time.

For example, in 2023, over 75 percent were 16 or 17, and just 7 percent were 14. Child labor laws are far more restrictive for 14-to-15-year-olds.

The type of work they do also hasn't changed much, as jobs in high school are usually a young person's first real work experience. In 2023, half of these workers were in nine occupations, with the top two being fast food and counter workers and retail salespersons. (See the table at right.)

Similarly, the vast majority are in just a few industries, with 54 percent working in accommodation

Teen workers by occupation, 2023

	Percent of teens in job
Fast Food and Counter Workers	16.7%
Retail Salespersons	8.4%
Food Preparation Workers	6.4%
Laborers and Freight, Stock, Matl Movers	4.4%
Cashiers	4.3%
Office and Administrative Support Workers	3.8%
Hosts/Hostesses, Restaurant, Lounge, Coffee	2.1%
Food Prep and Serving Related Workers	2.1%
Waiters and Waitresses	1.8%
Dining Rm/Cafeteria Attend, Bartender Helpers	1.7%
Receptionists and Information Clerks	1.7%
Landscaping and Groundskeeping Workers	1.6%
Grounds Maintenance Workers, All Other	1.5%
Office Clerks, General	1.5%
Dishwashers	1.4%
Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	1.4%
Stockers and Order Fillers	1.3%
Customer Service Representatives	1.3%
Coaches and Scouts	1.2%
Lifeguards, Ski Patrol, and Similar Workers	1.2%
Food Servers, Nonrestaurant	1.2%
Construction Laborers	1.1%
Recreation Workers	1.1%
Janitors and Cleaners, Exc Maids/Housekeeping	1.0%
Farmworkers/Laborers, Crop/Nursery/Green	0.9%
Packers and Packagers, Hand	0.9%
Sales and Related Workers, All Other	0.9%
Umpires, Referees, and Other Sports Officials	0.9%
Child Care Workers	0.9%
Cooks, Restaurant	0.8%

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Workers ages 14-17 in Alaska by industry, 2023

	Number of teenagers	Percent of teen wkrs	Avg wage, quarterly
Accommodation and Food Services	4,175	35.3%	\$2,399
Retail Trade	2,171	18.4%	\$2,232
Local Government	1,079	9.1%	\$1,523
Other Services (except Public Admin)	935	7.9%	\$1,262
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	701	5.9%	\$1,335
Health Care and Social Assistance	473	4.0%	\$1,933
Construction	364	3.1%	\$2,993
Transportation and Warehousing	361	3.1%	\$2,656
Admin Support/Waste Mgmt, Remediation	295	2.5%	\$2,303
Professional, Scientific, and Tech Services	216	1.8%	\$1,692
Manufacturing	214	1.8%	\$2,170
Educational Services	204	1.7%	\$1,083
Information	168	1.4%	\$1,918
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting	135	1.1%	\$1,986
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	129	1.1%	\$2,310
Wholesale Trade	65	0.6%	\$2,622
State Government	46	0.4%	\$2,063
Finance and Insurance	26	0.2%	\$2,507
Other/Unknown	54	0.5%	\$2,773
Total	11,811	100.0%	\$2,115

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

and food service — hotels, restaurants, food trucks, etc. — or retail. More than a third of all workers in accommodation and food services come from this age group.

Local government was another major employer of teens at just over 9 percent. In some parts of Alaska, especially rural areas where local government is the dominant employer because of the basic services it provides and because there are fewer jobs in hotels and restaurants, local government is also the largest employer of teens.

Concentrations of teen workers and top industries vary by area

Some areas have higher percentages of teens in their workforce than others.

Nearly 10 percent of workers in the rural Kusilvak Census Area in western Alaska were under 18 in 2023. Kusilvak is the youngest part of Alaska, and its workforce skews young.

The Hoonah-Angoon Census Area was second at 7.5 percent. While Hoonah-Angoon has an older population overall, it has high shares of both young workers and workers over 60.

Bristol Bay and Yakutat were the lowest at less than 2 percent each. Both areas have small resident workforces, with Yakutat's being the smallest in the state. Yakutat is also one of the oldest parts of Alaska.

Bristol Bay's largest employer is seafood processing, work that child labor laws don't allow for this

Percentages of resident workers who were aged 14 to 17 in 2023

	Percent teen workers
Kusilvak Census Area	9.7%
Hoonah-Angoon Census Area	7.5%
Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area	6.8%
Copper River Census Area	6.6%
Bethel Census Area	5.4%
Petersburg Borough	5.3%
Wrangell, City and Borough	4.9%
Haines Borough	4.9%
Sitka, City and Borough	4.9%
Matanuska-Susitna Borough	4.8%
Ketchikan Gateway Borough	4.8%
Chugach Census Area	4.2%
Prince of Wales-Hyder Census Area	4.2%
Kenai Peninsula Borough	4.1%
Fairbanks North Star Borough	4.0%
Juneau, City and Borough	3.8%
Denali Borough	3.8%
Southeast Fairbanks Census Area	3.7%
Skagway, Municipality	3.7%
Nome Census Area	3.3%
Aleutians East Borough	3.3%
Kodiak Island Borough	3.3%
Anchorage, Municipality	3.1%
Dillingham Census Area	2.9%
Aleutians West Census Area	2.6%
Lake and Peninsula Borough	2.4%
Northwest Arctic Borough	2.1%
North Slope Borough	2.0%
Yakutat, City and Borough	1.6%
Bristol Bay Borough	1.5%

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

age group, and most workers are nonresidents. Teens working in Bristol Bay may also be working on family-owned fishing vessels, jobs that aren't included in the data.

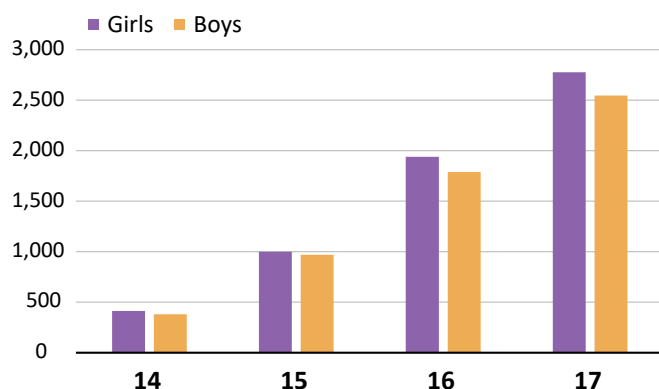
The common industries for these young workers also vary by area. In urban areas such as Anchorage, Fairbanks, and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, the top industry is accommodation and food services.

As mentioned, in rural areas, it's often local government. Local government includes tribal governments, which can also be top employers for teens in rural Alaska.

A narrower gender-wage gap

One characteristic unique to these young workers is the lack of a notable wage gap by gender.

More girls than boys working at all ages



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Top jobs for teens by gender, 2023

Alaska occupation

Girls, 14-17	Fast Food and Counter Workers Retail Salespersons Food Preparation Workers Cashiers Office and Administrative Support Workers Laborers/Freight, Stock, and Matl Movers, Hand Hosts/and Hostesses, Restaurant, Lounge and Coffee Shop Food Preparation and Serving Related Workers Waiters and Waitresses Receptionists and Information Clerks
Boys, 14-17	Fast Food and Counter Workers Retail Salespersons Food Preparation Workers Laborers/Freight, Stock, and Matl Movers, Hand Cashiers Office and Administrative Support Workers Landscaping and Groundskeeping Workers Construction Laborers Dining Room/Cafeteria/Bartender Helpers Dishwashers

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

The most recent data on wage differences between men and women in Alaska found that among residents, women earned 73 cents for every dollar a man earned in 2023. The gender wage gap is complex, influenced by experience, training, education, hours worked, job and industry choice, and discrimination.

Among these young workers, girls earned 96 cents for every dollar a boy earned. The gap was widest for 14-year-olds at 89 cents and smallest among 17-year-olds, where it was just under 97 cents on the dollar.

There are gender differences among teen workers, however. More girls were working in 2023, and at younger ages. Teen workers were 51.9 percent female and 48.1 percent male. The largest difference was at

About the data in this issue

The articles in this issue both cover Alaska residents only: workers 65 and older and workers aged 14 to 17. By area, we categorize workers by where they work rather than where they live.

Although workers can change jobs or work multiple jobs within a year, each worker and total wages earned during the year are assigned to the industry, occupation, place of work, and employer where they earned the most in a single quarter. For the 14-to-17 age group, we used quarterly rather than annual wages because they tend not to work all year.

To calculate employment and wages, we match PFD applicants with quarterly reports Alaska employers file as required by state unemployment insurance laws. Federal workers, the military, and the self-employed are excluded from those wage records because they are not covered by state unemployment insurance laws.

These articles use residency definitions and data from our *Nonresidents Working in Alaska* report, which considers workers residents if they applied for an Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend in either of the two most recent years.

age 17, when it was 52.2 percent to 47.8 percent.

Both genders work in mostly the same jobs, at least for the top three, but the lists diverge further down. (See the exhibit at right.)

Top jobs that only made the list for girls included restaurant hosts, food preparation and serving workers, waiters and waitresses, and receptionists. Top occupations only on the boys' list were landscapers, construction laborers, dining room attendants, and dishwashers.

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